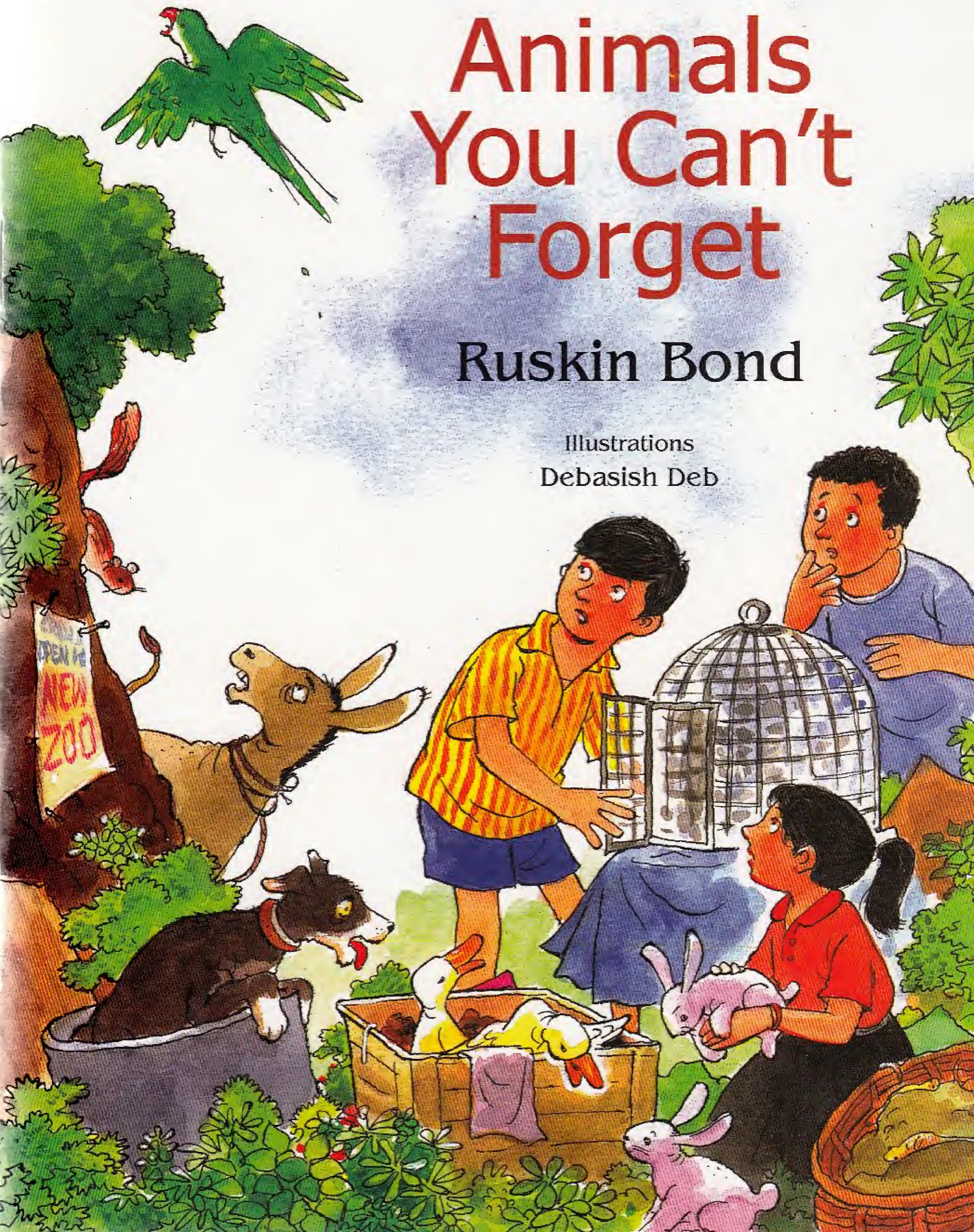


Animals You Can't Forget

Ruskin Bond

Illustrations
Debasish Deb



Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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The Big Race

I was awakened by the sound of the hornbill honking on the veranda, reminding Grandfather that breakfast was due. I lay in bed, looking through the open skylight as the early-morning sunshine crept up the wall. I knew there was something important about the day, and as the room got brighter and the hornbill stopped making noise, I remembered—it was the day of the big race.

I jumped out of bed, pulled open a dresser drawer, and brought out a cardboard box punctured with little holes. I opened the lid to see if Maharani was all right.

Maharani, the bamboo beetle, was asleep on the core of an apple. Grandfather and I had given her a week's rigorous training for the seasonal beetle-race, and she was enjoying a well-earned rest before the big event. I did not disturb her. Closing the box, I crept out the back door of the house. I was supposed to attend school that morning, and I did not want Grandmother to see me sneaking off to the municipal park near the bazaar. She did not approve of beetles, anyway.

When I reached the gardens, the sun was just beginning to make emeralds of the dew drops, and the grass was cool and springy under my bare feet. A group of boys and girls had gathered in a corner of the park, talking excitedly. Among them were the two boys who had invited me to take part in the race—Ranbir, a tough, confident thirteen year-old, and Anil, equally confident but gentler, and my age, twelve.

Ranbir's black rhino beetle was the favourite. It was a big

beetle with an aggressive forehead rather like its owner's. It was called Black Prince. Anil's beetle was quite ordinary in size, but it had a long pair of whiskers (I suspected it belonged to the cricket and not the beetle family) and was called Moocha, meaning moustache.

There were a few other entries, but none of them looked promising, and interest centered on Black Prince, Moocha, and my Maharani, still asleep on her apple core. A few discreet bets were being made, in coins or marbles, and a prize for the winner



was put on display. It was a great stag beetle, a really fierce-looking fellow, which was supposed to enable the winner to start a stable and breed racing beetles on a large scale.

There was some confusion when Anil's Moocha escaped from his box and took a preliminary canter over the grass, but he was soon caught and returned to his paddock.

The course was about six feet long. The tracks, six inches wide, were fenced with strips of cardboard so that the contestants could only go forward or backward. They were held at the starting post by another piece of cardboard, which would be placed behind them as soon as the race began.

A Sikh boy in a white and blue pajama-suit acted as starter, and he blew his whistle until it was quiet enough for him to announce the rules of the race: the beetles were not allowed to be touched while racing, or blown at from behind, or enticed forward with bits of food. Only moral assistance, in the form of cheering and advice, was allowed.

Moocha and Black Prince were ready to start, but Maharani seemed reluctant to leave her apple core. I had to separate her from it and plunk her down at the starting post. There was further delay when Moocha got his whiskers tangled with the legs of a rival, but they were soon separated and placed in their lanes. The race was about to start.

Anil squatted—quietly, seriously—looking from Moocha to the finish line and back again. I bit my nails. Ranbir's bushy eyebrows were bunched together in a scowl of concentration. There was a tense hush among the spectators.

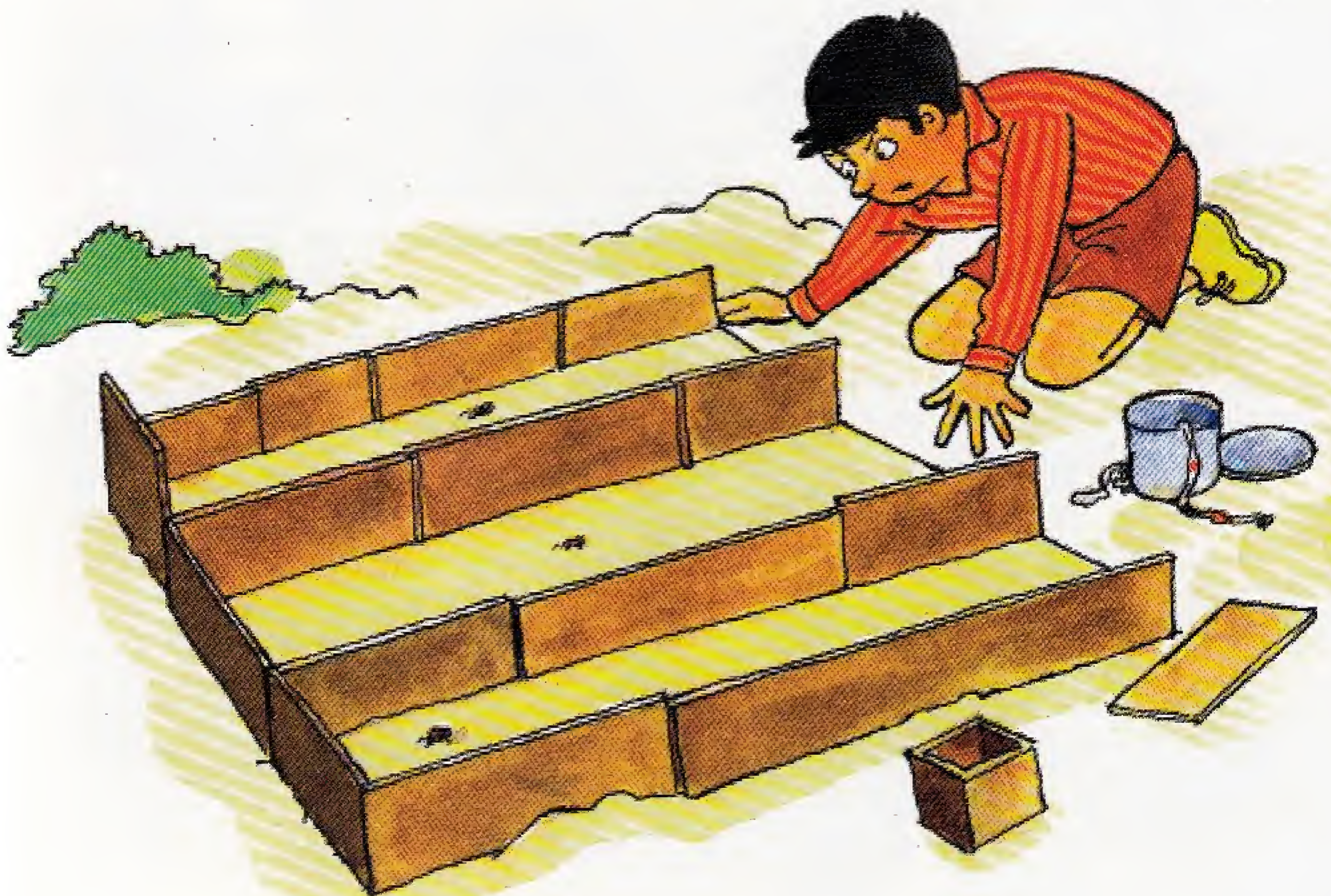
"Pee-ee-eep!" went the whistle. They were off!

Or rather, Moocha and Black Prince were off, but Maharani was still at the starting post, wondering what had happened to her apple core.

Everyone was cheering madly. Anil was jumping up and down, and Ranbir was shouting himself hoarse. Moocha was going at a

spanking rate. Black Prince really wasn't taking much interest in the proceedings, but at least he was moving, and anything could happen in a race of this nature. I was in a furious temper. All the coaching Grandfather and I had given Maharani seemed useless. She was still looking bewildered and a little resentful at having been deprived of her apple.

Then Moocha suddenly stopped, about two feet from the finish line. He seemed to be having trouble with his whiskers and kept twitching them this way and that. Black Prince was catching up



inch by inch, and both Anil and Ranbir were going wild. Nobody was paying any attention to Maharani, who was looking suspiciously at the persons nearest her; she suspected them of having something to do with the disappearance of her meal. I begged her to make an effort, and had to restrain myself from giving her a prod. But that would have meant instant disqualification.

As Black Prince drew level with Moocha, he stopped and appeared to be inquiring as to where the finishing line was. Anil



and Ranbir now became even more frenzied in their efforts to rally their racers, and the cheering on all sides was deafening.

Maharani, goaded by rage and frustration at having been deprived of her apple core, now decided to make a bid for liberty and pastures new, and rushed forward in great style.

I shouted with joy, but the others did not notice this new challenge until Maharani had drawn level with her conferring rivals. There was a gasp of surprise from the spectators as Maharani strode across the finish line in record time.

Everyone cheered the gallant outsider. Anil and Ranbir very sportingly shook my hand and congratulated me on my methods. The starter blew his whistle for silence and presented me with my prize.

I examined the new beetle with respect and gently stroked its hard, smooth back. In case Maharani should feel jealous, I returned her to her apple core. Anil declared that he would trim Moocha's whiskers before the next race, and Ranbir said he thought Black Prince should go on a diet.

When I got home, I showed Grandfather the prize stag beetle.

"He's a magnificent fellow," said Grandfather. "And I've got some new training methods up my sleeve. But we mustn't neglect Maharani." And he presented her with a large red apple. She wasted no time in getting to grips with it.



Henry: A Chameleon

This is the story of Henry, our pet chameleon.

Chameleons are in a class by themselves and are no ordinary reptiles. They are easily distinguished from their nearest relatives, the lizards, by certain outstanding features. A chameleon's tongue is as long as its body. Its limbs are long and slender, and its fingers and toes resemble a parrot's claws. On its head may be any of several ornaments—Henry had a rigid crest that looked like a fireman's helmet.

Henry's eyes were his most remarkable possession. They were not beautiful, but his left eye was quite independent of his right. He could move one eye without disturbing the other. Each eyeball, bulging out of his head, wobbled up and down, backward and forward. This frenzied movement gave Henry a horrible squint. And one look into Henry's frightful gaze was often enough to scare people into believing that chameleons are dangerous and poisonous reptiles.

One day, Grandfather was visiting a friend in northern India, when he came upon a noisy scene at the garden gate. Men were shouting, hurling stones, and brandishing sticks. The cause of the uproar was a chameleon that had been discovered sunning itself on a shrub. Someone claimed that the chameleon could poison people twenty feet away, simply by spitting at them. The residents of the area had risen in arms. Grandfather was just in time to save the chameleon from certain death—he brought the little reptile home.

That chameleon was Henry, and that was how he came to live with us.

When I first visited Henry, he would treat me with great caution, sitting perfectly still on his perch with his back to me. His nearest eye would move around like the beam of a searchlight until it had me well in focus. Then it would stop, and the other eye would begin an independent survey of its own. For a long time Henry trusted no one and responded to my friendliest gestures with grave suspicion.

Tiring of his wary attitude, I would tickle him gently in the ribs with my finger. This always threw him into a great rage. He



would blow himself up to an enormous size, his lungs filling his body with air, while his colour changed from green to red. He would sit up on his hind legs, swaying from side to side, hoping to overawe me. Opening his mouth very wide, he would let out an angry hiss. But his threatening display went no further. He did not bite.

He was a harmless fellow. If I put my finger in his mouth, even during his wildest moments, he would simply wait for me to take it out again. I suppose he could bite. His rigid jaws carried a number of finely pointed teeth. But Henry seemed convinced that his teeth were there for the sole purpose of chewing food, not fingers.

Henry was sometimes willing to take food from my hands. This he did very swiftly. His tongue performed like a boomerang and always came back to him with the food—usually an insect—attached to it.

Although Henry didn't cause any trouble in our house, he did create somewhat of a riot in the nursery down the road. It started out quite innocently.

When the papayas in our orchard were ripe, Grandmother sent a basketful to her friend Mrs. Ghosh, who was the principal of the nursery school. While the basket sat waiting, Henry went searching for beetles and slipped in among the papayas, unnoticed. The gardener dutifully carried the basket to the school and left it in Mrs. Ghosh's office. When Mrs. Ghosh returned after making her rounds, she began admiring and examining the papayas. Out popped Henry.

Mrs. Ghosh screamed. Henry squinted up at her, both eyes revolving furiously. Mrs. Ghosh screamed again. Henry's colour changed from green to yellow to red. His mouth opened as though he, too, would like to scream. An assistant teacher rushed in, took one look at the chameleon, and joined in the shrieking.

Henry was terrified. He fled from the office, running down the corridor and into one of the classrooms. There he climbed up a

desk while children ran in all directions—some to get away from Henry, some to catch him. Henry finally made his exit through a window and disappeared in the garden.

Grandmother heard about the incident from Mrs. Ghosh but didn't mention that the chameleon was ours. It might have spoiled their friendship.



Grandfather and I didn't think Henry would find his way back to us, because the school was three blocks away. But a few days later, I found him sunning himself on the garden wall. Although he looked none the worse for his adventure, he never went abroad again. Henry spent the rest of his days in the garden, where he kept the insect population well within bounds.





Owls in the Family

One winter morning, Grandfather and I found a baby spotted owlet by the veranda steps of our home in Dehradun, in northern India. When Grandfather picked it up, the owlet hissed and clacked its bill but then, after a meal of raw meat and water, settled down under my bed.

Spotted owlets are small birds—a fully grown one is no larger than a thrush—and they have none of the sinister appearance of larger owls. I had often found a pair of them in our old mango tree and, by tapping on the tree trunk, had persuaded one to show an inquiring face at the entrance to its hole. The owlet is not normally afraid of man, nor is it strictly a night bird. But it prefers to stay at home during the day, as it is sometimes attacked by other birds who consider all owls their enemies.

The little owlet was quite happy under my bed. The following day we found a second baby owlet in almost the same spot on the veranda, and only then did we realize that where the rainwater pipe emerged through the roof, there was a rough sort of nest from which the birds had fallen. We took the second young owl to join the first and fed them both.

When I went to bed, they were on the window ledge just inside the mosquito netting, and later in the night their mother found them there. From outside she crooned and gurgled for a long time, and in the morning I found that she had left a mouse with its tail tucked through the netting. Obviously, she put no great trust in me as a foster parent.

The young birds thrived, and ten days later Grandfather and I



took them into the garden to release them. I had placed one on a branch of the mango tree and was stooping to pick up the other when I received a heavy blow on the back of the head. A second or two later the mother owl swooped down at Grandfather, but he was agile enough to duck out of the way.

Quickly, I placed the second owl under the mango tree. Then from a safe distance we watched the mother fly down and lead her offspring into the long grass at the edge of the garden.

We thought she would take her family away from our rather strange household, but the next morning I found the two young owlets perched on the hat stand in the veranda.



I ran to tell Grandfather, and when we came back we found the mother sitting on the birdbath a few meters away. She was evidently feeling sorry for her behaviour the previous day, because she greeted us with a soft "whoo-who".

"Now there's an unselfish mother for you," said Grandfather. "It's obvious she wants us to keep an eye on them. They're probably getting too big for her to manage."

So the owlets became regular members of our household and were among the few pets that Grandmother took a liking to. She objected to all snakes, most monkeys, and some crows—we'd had all of these for pets from time to time—but she took quite a fancy to the owlets and frequently fed them spaghetti.



They seemed to like spaghetti. In fact, the owls became so attached to Grandmother that they began to display affection towards anyone in a petticoat, including my Aunt Mabel, who was terrified of them. Aunt Mabel would run screaming from the room every time one of the little birds sidled up to her in a friendly manner.

Forgetful of the fact that Grandfather and I had reared them, the owls would sometimes swell their feathers and peck at anyone in trousers. To avoid displeasing them, Grandfather would often slip into one of Grandmother's petticoats at feeding time. I compromised by wearing an apron, and this appeared to satisfy them.

In response to Grandmother's voice, the owlets would make sounds as gentle and soothing as the purring of a cat, but when wild owls were around, ours would rend the night with blood-curdling shrieks.

They loved to sit and splash in a shallow dish provided by Grandmother. They enjoyed it even more if cold water was poured over them from a jug while they were in the bath. They would get thoroughly wet, jump out and perch on a towel rack, shake themselves, then return for a second splash and sometimes a third. During the day they dozed on the hat stand. After dark they had the freedom of the house, and their nightly occupation was catching beetles, the kitchen quarters being a happy hunting ground. With their sharp eyes and powerful beaks, they were excellent pest destroyers.

Looking back on those childhood days, I carry in my mind a picture of Grandmother in her rocking chair with a contented owlet sprawling on her aproned lap. Once, on entering her room while she was taking an afternoon nap, I saw that one of the owlets had crawled up her pillow till its head was snuggled under her ear. Both Grandmother and the little owl were snoring!



The Adventures of Toto

It all began when Grandfather bought Toto from a tonga driver in the bazaar for five rupees. The driver used to keep the little red monkey tied to his pony's feeding trough, and the monkey looked so sorry for himself that Grandfather decided to add him to a household already over-populated with pets.

Toto was a pretty monkey. His bright eyes sparkled with mischief, and he often showed his pearly white teeth in a wide grin. It's true that his hands had a dried-up look, as though they had been pickled in the sun for many years. Yet his fingers were quick and wicked, and his tail, while adding to his good looks (a tail would add to anyone's good looks, according to Grandfather), served as a third hand. He could use it to hang from branches, and scoop up any delicacies that might be out of reach of his hands.

Grandmother always fussed when Grandfather brought home some new pet, so Grandfather and I decided to keep Toto's presence a secret until Grandmother was in a particularly good mood. We put him in a little closet which opened into my bedroom, and he did not object to being locked up.

A few hours later, when Grandfather and I came back to see if Toto was all right, we found that the walls, originally covered with some ornamental paper chosen by Grandmother, now stood out as naked brick and plaster. The peg in the wall had been wrenched from its socket, and my sports coat, which had been hanging there, was in shreds.

Grandfather seemed quite pleased with the monkey's performance. "The creature is clever," he said. "Given time, I'm

sure he could have tied the torn pieces of your coat into a rope and made his escape from the window."

Toto was now transferred to the garden shed where a number of Grandfather's pets lived. But the monkey would not allow any of his companions—a tortoise, a pair of rabbits, and a pony—to sleep that night.

When Toto was finally accepted by Grandmother (although she grumbled, she hadn't the heart to turn out any of Grandfather's pets), the monkey was given a comfortable home in the stable.

On cold winter evenings, a great treat for Toto was the hot bath Grandmother gave him. Before stepping into the large bowl of



water provided for him, Toto would cunningly test the temperature with his fingers. Then, gradually, he would get into the bath, first one foot, then the other (as he had seen me doing), until he was in the water up to his neck. Once comfortable, he would take the soap in his hands or feet and rub himself all over. When the water became cold, he would get out and run as quickly as he could to the kitchen fire to dry himself. If anyone laughed at him during this performance, Toto's feelings would be hurt, and he would refuse to go on with his bath.

One day, a large kettle was left on the fire to boil for tea. Toto, finding himself with nothing better to do, decided to remove the



lid. The water was just warm enough for a bath, so he got in, with only his head showing above the rim of the kettle. This was fine for a while, until the water began to boil. Toto then raised himself



a little but, finding it cold outside, sat down again. He continued hopping up and down for some time, until Grandfather finally arrived and hauled him, half-boiled, out of the kettle.

If there is a part of the brain especially devoted to mischief, that part was highly developed in Toto. Even Grandfather agreed that we could not keep a pet like him for very long. We could not afford the frequent loss of dishes, clothes, curtains, and wallpaper, but we were reluctant to return Toto to the tonga driver. Our problem was solved one day when a wandering holy man walked into the compound and said he was looking for his sacred monkey.

"We do have a monkey," said Grandfather. "But he is more unholy than sacred."

"My monkey was very sacred," said the holy man. "He was stolen six months ago. Later I traced him to a tonga driver in the bazaar, and he told me he had sold the monkey to the Sahib who has a zoo in his house."

There was only one Sahib with a zoo in his house, and that was Grandfather.

"Well," said Grandfather, "I did buy a monkey in the bazaar, and if he's yours, you're welcome to him."

At that moment, Toto appeared on the veranda. He saw the holy man in his ochre-coloured robe, squealed with delight, and leapt on to the man's shoulders.

"He's certainly your monkey," said Grandfather.

"Is he really sacred?" I asked, wondering if a mischievous boy might also be sacred.

"Very sacred," said the holy man.

"You can have him," said Grandmother.

Grandfather attempted to get five rupees in exchange for Toto, but ended up giving the holy man a five-rupee donation. The holy man gave us his blessings. I gave Toto a bunch of bananas and received *his* blessings. And Grandmother gave Grandfather a piece of her mind.



A Fairy with Horns

Though Grandfather provided the household with as large a variety of pets as one could wish for, my own favourite was the little black goat who followed me home from the mustard fields one day.

Each year, before the monsoon rains came, the little Song River was a narrow stream. I liked wading across it and then wandering through the fields and tea gardens, watching the men moving about among the yellow mustard and the women in their bright red saris picking tea.

I had been sitting on the bank of a small irrigation canal, gazing at a couple of herons fishing in muddy water, when I felt something bump my elbow. Looking around, I found at my side a little goat, jet black and soft as velvet, with lovely grey eyes. Neither her owner nor her mother was around.

She continued to nudge me, so I looked in my pockets for nourishment and, finding a ginger biscuit, held it out to her. She ate it with relish, then sat down beside me and began nibbling at the grass. A little later, when I got up to leave, the goat rose, too. And when I started walking home, she followed me unsteadily, her thin legs taking her this way and that.

"Go home!" I said as she danced around me. But she followed me to the riverbed. It was obvious that her trembling legs would not stand up to the current, so I took her in my arms and carried her across the stream. When I set her down, she remained by my side, rubbing against my legs.

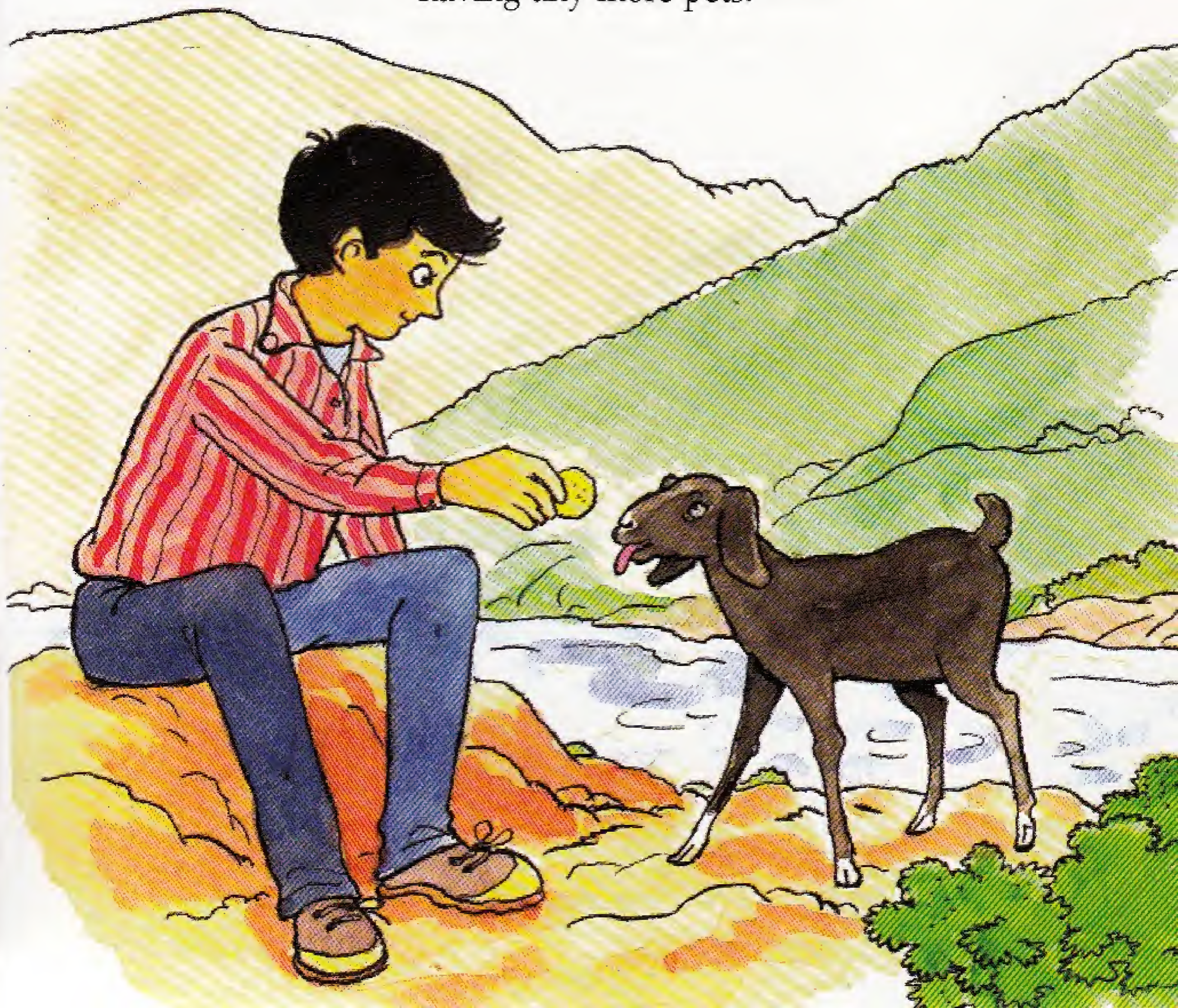
I set out for home at a brisk pace, feeling sure that I would soon

leave the little goat behind. But her legs were stronger than I had supposed. She came hopping along, right up to the gate of our house.

There was nothing I could do but carry her in and present her to Grandfather.

"Not another pet!" said Grandmother when she saw the goat on the veranda, lapping a saucer of milk. "I've told both of you again and again that I will not tolerate another animal in the house!"

It was easy to understand Grandmother's objections. The recent destructiveness of Toto, our monkey who had torn curtains and broken dishes, had set Grandmother dead against having any more pets.



It was Grandfather who usually brought home various animals. Had Grandmother known that I, too, had started bringing home livestock, she might have considered sending me back to boarding school. So, Grandfather, always my ally, had to pretend that he had purchased the goat as an investment.

"Goat's milk is very good for your rheumatism," he told Grandmother.

The prospect of milk made Grandmother more tolerant of the new pet, even though she knew it would be some time before the goat could give any.

My goat was soon named Tinker Bell, after the fairy in *Peter Pan*. There was something of the fairy in Tinker. She skipped about very daintily, and her feet seemed equipped with springs when she leaped around the lawn. To make



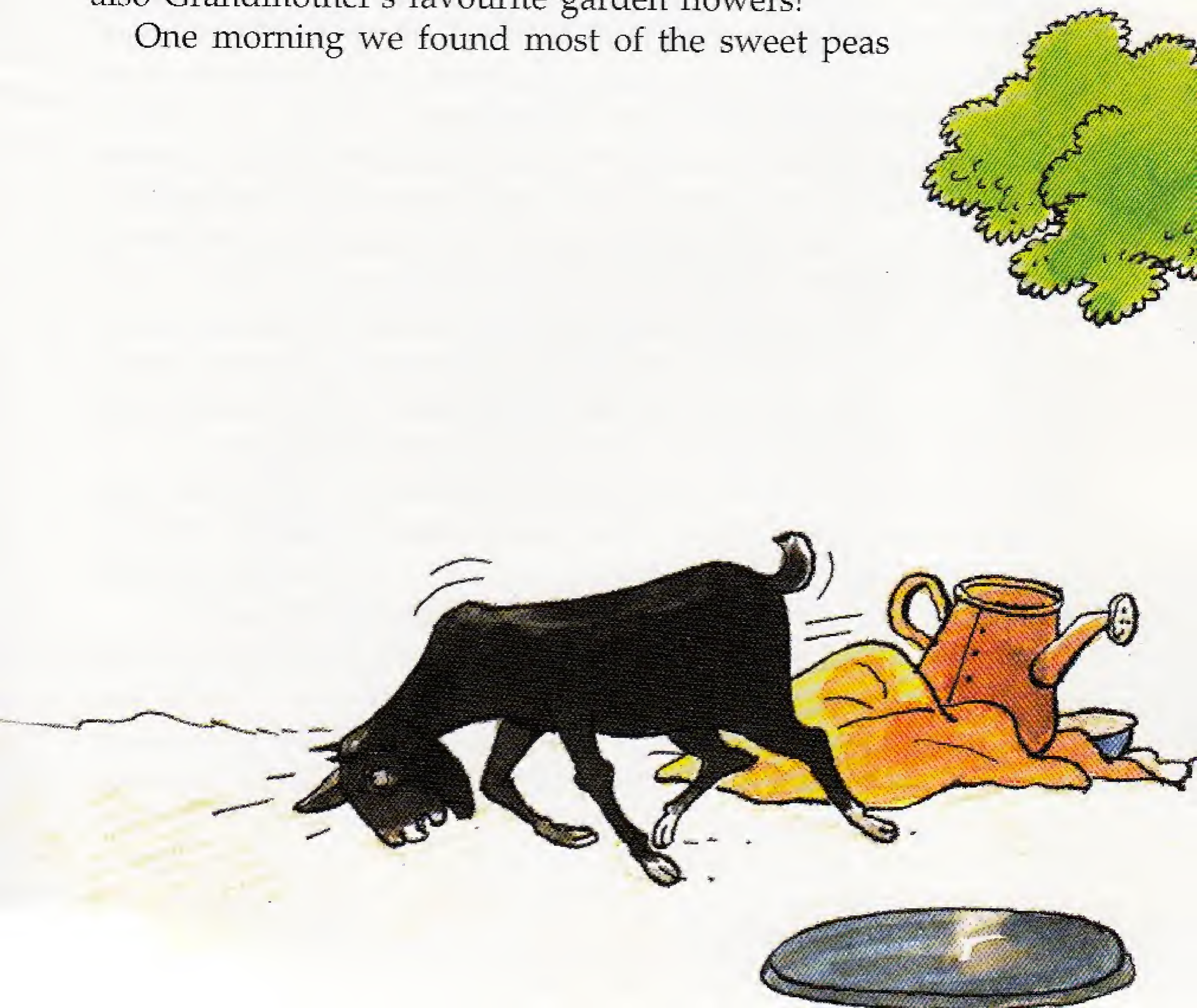
the name even more fitting, I tied a little bell to her neck so I'd always know by its tinkling where she'd be.

She loved an early morning walk and was in many ways a better companion than a dog: she didn't wander off on her own or get into quarrels with cats, stray dogs, or porcupines. The only things she chased were butterflies, and she would tumble into ditches and slither down slopes in her eagerness to follow them.

But goats grow fast, and unlike Peter Pan, Tinker Bell, and the fairies, our Tinker had to grow up.

To begin with, she developed a neat little pair of horns. Her appetite began to increase, too. She loved the leaves and flowers of the sweet pea, the nasturtium, and the geranium. These were also Grandmother's favourite garden flowers!

One morning we found most of the sweet peas



destroyed. Hastily Grandfather and I blamed a cow, suggesting that it had got into the garden during the night. Grandmother made no comment, but gave a look that suggested she knew just who the culprit was.

Of course, trouble, just like unseasonal rain, came when we were least expecting it.

Tinker, having discovered the uses to which she could put her horns, began using them at almost every opportunity. The gardener, postman, and the fruit-seller all had complaints to make. They dared not turn their backs on dear little Tinker Bell.

The climax came during the visit of one of my aunts. Aunt Mabel was in the habit of bending over flowerpots and holding brief conversations with the flowers. She said it helped them grow faster.

She was bending over a pot, talking to a geranium, when Tinker, suspecting that my aunt was eating the leaves, decided to butt this intruder out of the way of her favourite snack.

Aunt Mabel did not take kindly to being kicked off the veranda. And that was the end of Tinker's stay with us. Grandmother ordered the cook to take her straight to the bazaar and sell her at any price to the first customer who came along.

I stood at the gate and watched poor Tinker being led away. She kept looking back and bleating, probably wondering why I wasn't accompanying her on this particular walk. I could only wave to her and hope that her next owner would be kind.

When the cook came back, he said that Tinker had been sold. But later, when I was alone with him in the kitchen, he told me that he had bought the goat himself, and that I could come and see Tinker from time to time in her new home behind the bazaar.

I did visit Tinker sometimes. And in due course I found her with a little kid. Tinker had become a good provider of milk, and the cook's family was pleased with her. She was on good terms with everyone and only butted strangers who bowed too low when giving the customary salaam.



When Grandfather Tickled a Tiger

Timothy, our tiger cub, was found by my grandfather on a hunting expedition in the Terai jungles near Dehra, in northern India. Because Grandfather lived in Dehra and knew the jungles well, he was persuaded to accompany the hunting party.

Grandfather, strolling down a forest path some distance from the main party, discovered a little abandoned tiger about eighteen inches long, hidden among the roots of a banyan tree. After the expedition ended, Grandfather took the tiger home to Dehra, where Grandmother gave him the name Timothy.

Timothy's favourite place in the house was the living room. He would snuggle down comfortably on the sofa, reclining there with serene dignity and snarling only when anyone tried to take his place. One of his chief amusements was to stalk whoever was playing with him, and so, when I went to live with my grandparents, I became one of the tiger's pets. With a crafty look in his eyes, and his body in a deep crouch, he would creep closer and closer to me, suddenly making a dash for my feet. Then, rolling on his back and kicking with delight, he would pretend to bite my ankles.

By this time he was the size of a full-grown golden retriever, and when I took him for walks in Dehra, people on the road would give us a wide berth. At night he slept in the quarters of our cook, Mahmoud. "One of these days," Grandmother declared, "we are going to find Timothy sitting on Mahmoud's bed and no sign of Mahmoud!"

When Timothy was about six months old, his stalking became

more serious, and he had to be chained up more frequently. Even the household started to mistrust him and, when he began to trail Mahmoud around the house with what looked like villainous intent, Grandfather decided it was time to transfer Timothy to a zoo.

The nearest zoo was at Lucknow, some two hundred miles away. Grandfather reserved a first-class compartment on the train for himself and Timothy and set forth. The Lucknow zoo authorities were only too pleased to receive a well-fed and fairly civilized tiger.

Grandfather had no opportunity to see how Timothy was getting on in his new home until about six months later, when he

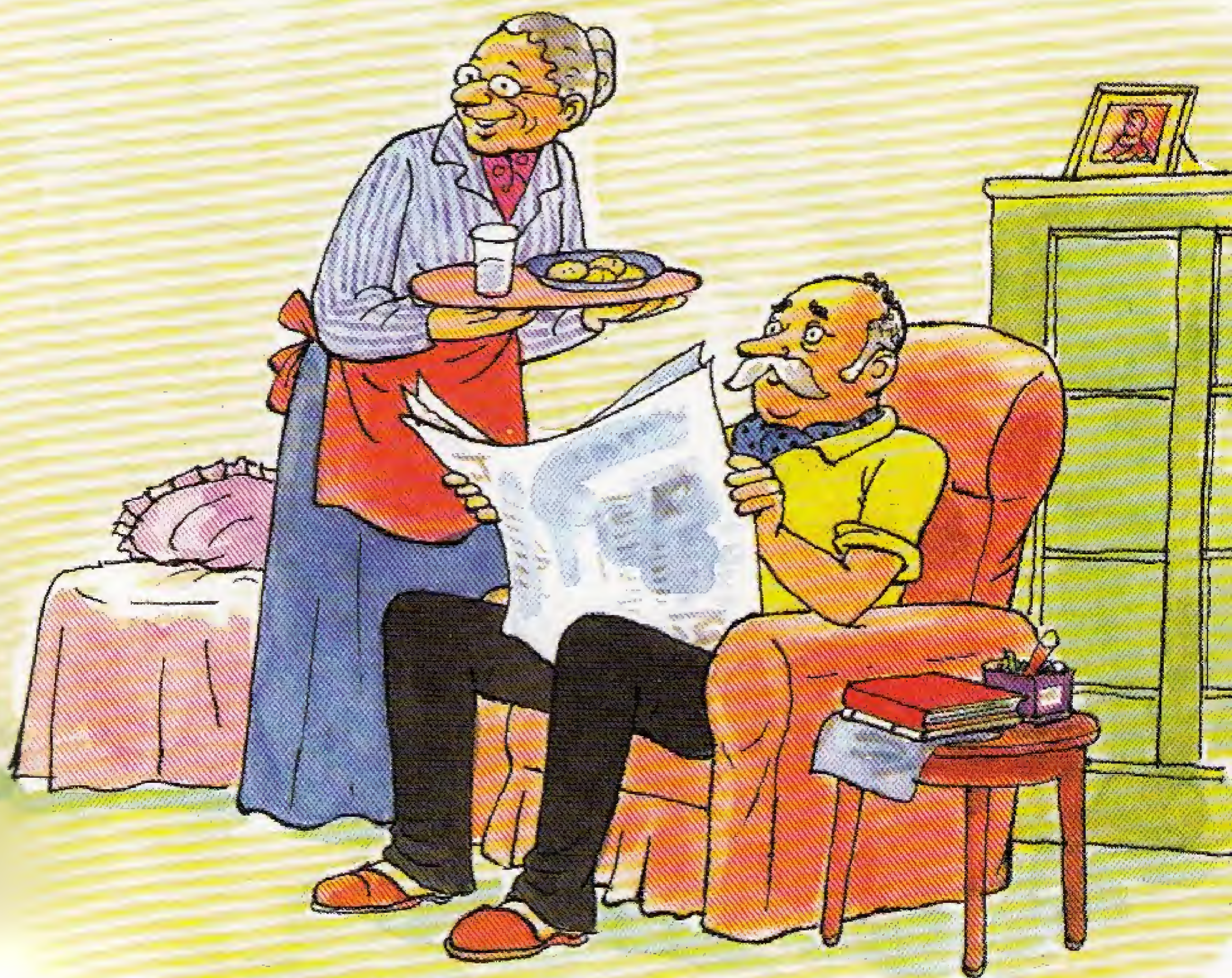


and Grandmother visited relatives in Lucknow. Grandfather went to the zoo and directly to Timothy's cage. The tiger was there, crouched in a corner, full-grown, his magnificent striped coat gleaming with health.

"Hello, Timothy," Grandfather said.

Climbing the railing, he put his arms through the bars of the cage. Timothy approached and allowed Grandfather to put both arms about his head. Grandfather stroked the tiger's forehead and tickled his ears. Each time Timothy growled, Grandfather gave him a smack across the mouth, which had been his way of keeping the tiger quiet when he lived with us.

Timothy licked Grandfather's hands. Then he showed





nervousness, springing away when a leopard in the next cage snarled at him, but Grandfather shooed the leopard off, and Timothy returned to licking his hands. Every now and then the leopard would rush at the bars, and Timothy would again slink back to a neutral corner.

A number of people had gathered to watch the reunion, when a keeper pushed his way through the crowd and asked Grandfather what he was doing. "I'm talking to Timothy," said Grandfather. "Weren't you here when I gave him to the zoo six months ago?"

"I haven't been here very long," said the surprised keeper. "Please continue your conversation. I have never been able to touch that tiger myself. I find him very bad-tempered."

Grandfather had been stroking and slapping Timothy for about five minutes when he noticed another keeper observing him with some alarm. Grandfather recognized him as the keeper who had been there when he had delivered Timothy to the zoo. "You remember me," said Grandfather. "Why don't you transfer Timothy to a different cage, away from this stupid leopard?"

"But—sir," stammered the keeper. "It is not your tiger."

"I realize that he is no longer mine," said Grandfather testily. "But at least take my suggestion."

"I remember your tiger very well," said the keeper. "He died two months ago."

"Died!" exclaimed Grandfather.

"Yes, sir, of pneumonia. This tiger was trapped in the hills only last month, and he is very dangerous!"

The tiger was still licking Grandfather's arms and apparently enjoying it more all the time. Grandfather withdrew his hands from the cage in a motion that seemed to take an age. With his face near the tiger's he mumbled, "Good night, Timothy." Then, giving the keeper a scornful look, Grandfather walked briskly out of the zoo.



Mukesh Starts a Zoo

On a visit to Delhi, Mukesh went to the zoo with his parents. He was fascinated by the colourful birds, the reptiles, the gibbons and chimps, and especially by the big cats—the lions, tigers, and leopards. There was no zoo in the small town of Dehra where he lived. As soon as he got home, he decided that he would have a zoo of his own.

"I'm going to start a zoo," he announced at breakfast the next morning.

"But you don't have any birds or animals," said Dolly, his little sister.

"I'll find some," said Mukesh. "That's what a zoo is all about—collecting animals."

He was gazing at the whitewashed walls of the veranda, where a gecko, a small wall lizard, was in pursuit of a fly. After breakfast Mukesh tried to catch the lizard. But the gecko was more alert than it looked and always managed to keep a few inches ahead of his grasp.

"That's not the way to catch a lizard," said Teju, who had come over from next-door.

"You catch it, then," said Mukesh.

Teju fetched a stick from the garden and used it to tip the lizard off the wall and into a shoebox.

"You'll be my head keeper," said Mukesh, and soon he and Teju were at work in the back garden setting up enclosures with a roll of wire netting they'd found in the poultry shed.

"What else can we have in the zoo?" asked Teju. "We need more than a lizard."

"There's your grandmother's parrot," said Mukesh.

"That's a good idea," said Teju, "but I don't think she'll lend it to us. You see, it's a religious parrot. She's taught it lots of prayers and chants."

"Then people are sure to come and listen to it. They'll pay, too."

"You're right. We'll get the parrot somehow. What else?"



"Well, there's my dog," said Mukesh. "He's very fierce."

"But a dog isn't a zoo animal."

"Mine is—he's a wild dog. He's black all over and he's got yellow eyes. There's no other dog like him."

Mukesh's dog, who spent most of his time sleeping on the veranda, raised his head and obligingly revealed his yellow eyes.

"He's got jaundice," said Teju.

"No, he doesn't. His eyes have always been yellow," said Mukesh.

"All right, then, we've got a lizard, a parrot, and a black dog with yellow eyes," said Teju.

"Your sister Koki has a white rabbit. Will she lend it to us?" asked Mukesh.

"I don't know," said Teju doubtfully, adding, "She might let us rent it, though."

"Let's see if we can get Sitaram's donkey, too," said Mukesh.

Sitaram, the washerman's son, used a donkey to collect and deliver the laundry at the houses along the street.

"Do you really want a donkey?" asked Teju.

"Why not? It's a *wild* donkey."

"I've heard of a wild ass, but not a wild donkey," said Teju.

"Well, they're all related to each other—asses, donkeys, and mules."

"Why don't you paint black stripes on it and call it a zebra?" asked Teju.

"No, that's cheating," said Mukesh. "It's got to be a proper zoo."

On Saturday afternoon, a large sign announcing the opening of the zoo hung from the branch of the jackfruit tree. Children were allowed in free, but grownups had to buy tickets at fifty paise each. Koki and Dolly were selling homemade tickets to the occasional passerby and to parents who happened to look in. Mukesh and his friends had worked hard at making notices for

the various enclosures, and each animal was appropriately identified.

The first attraction was a large packing case filled with an assortment of house lizards. They looked rather sluggish, having been generously fed with a supply of beetles and other insects.

Koki's white rabbit was on display in the next enclosure. Staring at it with evil intent from behind wire netting was Mukesh's dog—RARE BLACK DOG WITH YELLOW EYES read the notice. Those yellow eyes were now trying to hypnotize the pink eyes of Koki's nervous rabbit. The dog pawed at the ground, trying to dig his way under the fence in order to get at the rabbit's compartment.

Tethered to a mango tree was Sitaram's small donkey. And tacked to the tree was a sign saying WILD ASS FROM KUTCH. A distant relative it may have been, but everyone recognized it as the local washerman's beast of burden. Every now and then it tried to break loose, for it was way past its feeding time.

There was also a duck that didn't seem to belong to anyone and a small cow that had strayed in on its own. But the star attraction was the parrot. As it could recite three different prayers, over and over again, it was soon surrounded by a group of admiring parents, all of whom wished they had a parrot who could pray. Oddly enough, Teju and Koki's grandmother had chosen that day for visiting the temple, so she was unaware of the fuss that was being made of her pet.

While Mukesh and Teju were escorting visitors about the zoo, lecturing them on wild dogs and wild asses, Koki and Dolly were doing a brisk trade at the ticket counter. They had collected about ten rupees and were hoping to increase sales, when there was a disturbance in the zoo.

The black dog with yellow eyes had finally managed to dig his way out of his enclosure and was now trying to dig his way into the rabbit's compartment. The rabbit was running around and

around in panic-stricken circles. Meanwhile, the donkey managed to snap the rope that held it and, braying loudly, scattered the spectators and made for home.

Shrieking, Koki ran to rescue her rabbit and soon had it safely cradled in her arms. Frustrated, the dog turned his attention to the duck. The duck flew over the packing case, but the dog landed in it, scattering lizards in all directions.



In all this confusion, no one noticed that the door to the parrot's cage had slipped open. With a pleased squawk and a whir of wings, the bird shot out of the cage and flew off.

"The parrot's gone!" shouted Dolly, and almost immediately a silence fell upon the assembled visitors and children. Even the dog stopped barking. Granny's praying parrot had escaped! How could they possibly face her?



The crowd quickly dispersed, unwilling to share any of the blame when Teju and Koki's grandmother came home and found out what had happened.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Teju.

Mukesh was too upset to say or do anything.

Koki had an idea. "I know!" she said. "We'll get another one!"

"How?"

"Well, here's ten rupees we've collected. We can buy a new parrot for ten rupees!"

So, taking the cage with them, they hurried off to the bazaar, where they soon found a bird seller who sold them a parrot that looked like Granny's. He assured them it would talk.

"It does look like your grandmother's parrot," admitted Mukesh on the way home. "But can it pray?"

"Of course not," said Koki. "But we can teach it."

Teju and Koki's grandmother, who was shortsighted, didn't notice the substitution, but she complained bitterly that the bird had stopped repeating its prayers and was now making rude noises and even swearing occasionally.

Teju soon remedied this sad situation. Every morning he stood in front of the parrot's cage and repeated Granny's prayers. Within a few weeks the bird had learned to repeat one of them. Granny was happy again—not only because her parrot was praying once more, but because Teju had started praying, too!

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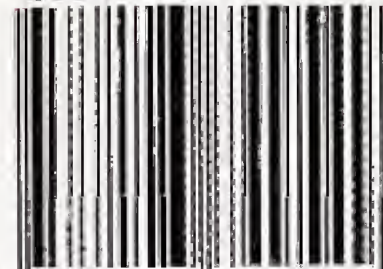
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